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ABSTRACT

Media use patterns for an anticipated event of considerable magnitude--the resignation of Richard Nixon--were hypothesized as likely to put a high contraint on interpersonal learning. Information for the study was gathered in a telephone survey of persons living in and around the southern Illinois town of DeSota (population 966). Of the 241 respondents, 235 (97.5 percent) were aware of the Nixon resignation when contacted by interviewers. Four of the six nonknowers were age 54 or older, and four had an eighth grade education or less. It was concluded that there was relatively little interpersonal learning associated with the Nixon resignation story, with the news media serving as the primary source of information. (RB)

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A STUDY OF MEDIA USE PATTERNS

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NEWS DIFFUSION IN THE NIXON RESIGNATION STORY: A STUDY OF MEDIA USE PATTERNS

By Harold L. Sohn

When Richard Nixon announced his intention to resign the Presidency of the United States an opportunity was provided to investigate news diffusion and media use patterns under unique circumstances. The Nixon resignation was not only a first historically, the circumstances surrounding it were different from those in previously reported diffusion studies.

The resignation might be considered a story of similar magnitude to the assassination of President John Kennedy since both involved Presidents and a change in the Presidency. Magnitude of the event has been suggested as a factor in determining interpersonal diffusion of a news story.[1] But the Kennedy assassination was totally unexpected while the Nixon resignation was not. Resignation rumors surfaced days before the actual resignation speech was made. When it was announced on the morning of August 8, 1974, that President Nixon would speak that evening, news reports left

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[1]John B. Adams and James J. Mullen, "Diffusion of the News of a Foreign Event: A Nationwide Study," paper presented at the convention of the Association for Education in Journalism, Lawrence, Kansas, August 1968.

little doubt but that the purpose of the speech was for the President to announce his resignation. Greenberg, Brinton and Farr[2] concluded that the diffusion pattern of an anticipated event paralleled an unanticipated major news event, but the event they studied (a heavyweight championship fight) could hardly be considered of the magnitude of a Presidential resignation.

The events leading to the Nixon resignation had been unfolding for years. The fact they seemed to be peaking with the passage of articles of impeachment by the House Judiciary Committee, and the President's subsequent release of materials which indicated he had been involved in a coverup of illegal activities may have served to sensitize the public to the mass media. The Spitzers[3] were able to investigate the diffusion patterns in an audience sensitized to the mass media when they examined the news flow in the shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald, the accused assassin of John Kennedy. They found that while television was the medium of first learning in 19 percent of their sample for the Kennedy assassination, it informed 50 percent of the same sample of the Oswald shooting. Interpersonal communication, which informed 55 percent

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[2]Bradley S. Greenberg, James E. Brinton, and Richard S. Farr, "Diffusion of News about an Anticipated Major News Event," Journal of Broadcasting 9 (Spring 1965): 129-142.

[3]Stephen P. Spitzer and Nancy S. Spitzer, "Diffusion of News of Kennedy and Oswald Deaths," in The Kennedy Assassination and the American Public, ed: Bradley S. Greenberg and Edwin P. Parker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), pp. 99-111.

in the Kennedy assassination, was the source of first learning for 29 percent in the Oswald death. They concluded the heavier usage of television in the Oswald death was likely due, at least in part, to a sensitization to the mass media because of the assassination of Kennedy.

The timing and method of the Nixon resignation speech--in the evening over live radio and television networks--were similar to those encountered by Allen and Colfax[4] in their investigation of diffusion of knowledge of Lyndon Johnson's decision not to run for a second term in the White House. They hypothesized that such conditions put a high constraint on interpersonal learning of the event.

Both the Oswald shooting and the Johnson decision were unanticipated events. The current study concerns the media use patterns for an anticipated event of considerable magnitude, in an audience sensitized to the mass media, during a time period likely to put a high constraint on interpersonal learning.

METHOD

Information for the study was gathered in a telephone survey of persons living in and around the small southern Illinois town of DeSoto (population 966). Interviews were conducted by graduate students in journalism at Southern

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[4]Irving L. Allen and David J. Colfax, "The Diffusion of News of LBJ's March 31 Decision," Journalism Quarterly 45 (Summer 1968): 321-324.

Illinois University during the 24-hour period following the President's resignation speech. Attempts were made to reach each of the approximately 400 residential listings on the DeSoto exchange. The survey resulted in 241 usable interviews. Interviewers began the questioning by asking respondents, "What is the most important news event you have heard about in the past 24 hours?" The answers were used to distinguish persons aware of the President's resignation from those not aware. Political party information, voting record and personal data only were collected from the non-knowers, while persons aware of the resignation were asked media use questions to learn how they obtained the information. Persons who saw or heard the President's live resignation speech were asked whether they watched or listened by plan or by chance, and those who had planned their attendance to the speech were asked how they had learned the speech would be aired.

RESULTS

Of the total respondents (N=241), 97.5 percent (n=235) were aware of the Nixon resignation when contacted by interviewers. Four of the six non-knowers were encountered in the first hour and a half of the diffusion process, and the remaining two on Friday morning, August 9, more than 14 hours into the diffusion process. Four of the six non-knowers were age 54 or older, and four had an eighth grade education or less.

The live broadcast of the President's resignation speech was watched or heard by 185 respondents (76.8 percent). Eight respondents who missed the speech learned of the resignation by 8:30 p.m. (CDT), or within 15 minutes after the speech. An additional 15 learned by 9 p.m., and 10 more by 10 p.m.

Of the 235 knowers, 192 (81.7 percent) learned of the resignation from television, 20 (8.5 percent) from radio, and 21 (8.9 percent) from another person. Two (.9 percent) learned from other sources (Table 1). Of the 185 persons who saw or heard the live speech by the President, 170 did so by plan and 15 by chance. Television informed 103 (60.6 percent) of the 170 planned attenders of the fact the President would be speaking. Radio informed 33 (19.4 percent), newspapers 20 (11.8 percent), and interpersonal 14 (8.2 percent) (Table 2). A test of proportions indicated that television learning of the resignation was significantly greater than television learning of the speech ($z=4.6889$, $p<.05$). A significant chi square (Table 3) was obtained in a test of television learning and learning from sources other than television by sex with women more likely than men to have learned of the resignation from television.

Chi square tests of interest in the resignation story, approval of the President's decision to resign, voting record in the 1972 Presidential election and political party identification by television learning and learning from all

sources other than television were not significant.

DISCUSSION

The investigation of the media use patterns of members of a small southern Illinois community in following the Nixon resignation story produced some results different from those of previously reported diffusion studies.

The Nixon resignation story is almost certain to be considered the top news story of 1974, and, barring a series of some catastrophic events, one of the top news stories of the decade. Yet, unlike the Kennedy assassination nearly 11 years earlier, there was relatively little interpersonal learning associated with the Nixon story. There are several possible explanations for this finding, among them (1) the nature of the sample, (2) changes in media use patterns, (3) the nature of the event, and (4) the timing of the event.

DeSoto's population of 966 is minuscule compared to Dallas, Denver and even Iowa City, which were among the sites of Kennedy diffusion studies. But it seems unlikely that the sample coming from a small town would decrease the potential for interpersonal learning. Festinger, et al.[5] concluded that friendship may be taken as indicative of active channels of interpersonal

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[5] Leon Festinger, Dorwin Cartwright, Kathleen Barber, Juliet Fleischal, Josephone Gottsdanker, Annette Keysen, and Gloria Leavitt, "A Study of Rumor, Its Origin and Spread," Human Relations 1 (1948): 464-486.

communication. In a town of DeSoto's size the potential for the establishment of such channels on a community-wide basis would seem to be greater than in larger towns and cities.

Even though Sheatsley and Feldman[6] did not find broadcast media more active than interpersonal communication in diffusion of information about the Kennedy assassination, they credited growth of the broadcast industry with the rapid dissemination of the assassination bulletin. They said it was possible for "virtually 100 percent of the public to become aware of a crucial event within a very few hours," while such was not the case as little as 20 years before the assassination. Household and business penetration by radio and television have increased since the Sheatsley and Feldman study, making their conclusion even more acceptable today than it was when they made it. Changes in media use patterns seems a more plausible explanation for the dominant role played by television in disseminating information on the Nixon resignation than does the nature of the sample.

Another possible explanation of the dominance of television in delivering the Nixon story is the nature of the story itself, and the events surrounding it. Researchers have often referred to the magnitude of the event as a factor in prompting interpersonal learning about that event.

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[6]Paul J. Sheatsley and Jacob J. Feldman, "The Assassination of President Kennedy: A Preliminary Report on Public Reactions," Public Opinion Quarterly 28 (Summer 1964): 189-215.

The results of the DeSoto study suggest that the "explosiveness" of a story may be more important than mere magnitude in influencing interpersonal diffusion. For major events (such as elections, moon walks, or long-rumored Presidential resignations) which do not come as a "shock" to the public, broadcast rather than interpersonal communication can be expected, it seems, to play the leading role in diffusion. The Hill and Bonjean[7] conclusion that interpersonal communication becomes the most important single source for news of extraordinary significance should perhaps be modified to "interpersonal communication becomes the most important single source for stories of extraordinary shock and surprise." It is suggested that the event which explodes into the headlines with no buildup will cause more activity in the interpersonal channels than will a story of similar "magnitude" which is preceded by a big buildup.

Television's commanding role in disseminating information on the Nixon resignation was also undoubtedly aided by the timing of the event. Since the resignation speech was made at a time when majorities of people had access to the homebound medium of television it seems reasonable that television was so important in delivering the information.

No matter what the nature of the sample, the nature of the story, or the timing of the event, it seems

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[7]Richard J. Hill and Charles M. Bonjean, "News Diffusion: A Test of the Regularity Hypothesis," Journalism Quarterly 41 (Summer 1964): 336-342.

Mendelsohn's[8] conclusion that "since contemporary Americans seem to be constantly seeking news via the mass media, it is considerably more likely that majorities of people will learn of emergent public crises directly from the mass media simply as a function of constant access to the media" has considerable validity.

The six non-knowers in the study can not be termed part of a "hard core of chronic know nothings" in the Hyman and Sheatsley[9] sense since their lack of awareness was discovered in such a short period after the event. They would have perhaps become knowers, given more time to become exposed to the information. Several did, however, fit the classic characteristics of know nothings.

It seems unlikely that given a story of magnitude similar to the Nixon resignation, but one totally unexpected, television would be the medium of first learning for as many persons as it was in this study. But it does not seem improbable that for any great national event, expected or unexpected, we have reached the point where the broadcast media rather than interpersonal communication will play the major role in diffusion of information about that event.

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[8]Harold Mendelsohn, "Broadcast vs. Personal Sources of Information in Emergent Public Crises: The Presidential Assassination," Journal of Broadcasting 8 (Spring 1964): 147-156.

[9]Herbert H. Hyman and Paul Sheatsley, "Some Reasons Why Information Campaigns Fail," Public Opinion Quarterly 11 (1947): 413-423.

TABLE 1

SOURCES OF FIRST LEARNING OF RESIGNATION

Source	N	Percent
Television	192	81.7%
Radio	20	8.5%
Interpersonal	21	8.9%
Other	2	.9%

TABLE 2

HOW PLANNED ATTENDERS LEARNED OF SPEECH

Source	N	Percent
Television	103	60.6%
Radio	33	19.4%
Interpersonal	14	8.2%
Newspapers	20	11.8%

TABLE 3

SOURCE OF FIRST LEARNING OF RESIGNATION BY SEX

	Television	All other
Female	145	25
Male	47	17

$\chi^2 = 4.4383$, $p < .05$